

Published in *Journal of Political Power* [2013] 6(3): 405-418

## **The Paradox of Power: Conceptions of Power and the Relations of Reason and Emotion in European and Chinese Culture.**

Jack Barbalet

Department of Sociology, Hong Kong Baptist University

Institute for Culture and Society, University of Western Sydney

Xiaoying Qi

Sociology, University of Wollongong

### **Abstract.**

An historical consequence of power relations in European culture has been a dichotomy of reason and emotion. This pattern did not arise in China, one of the oldest and most enduring structures of power in human history. The social basis of the Chinese concept of *xin* (heart-mind) is considered in the paper, and a discussion of a characteristic Chinese conception of power is also presented.

### **Introduction.**

Power can be understood generically as a causal factor in relations between even inanimate objects. In collision the velocity, direction and physical structure of the things involved are likely to be changed by the power of one to affect the other. The form here is 'power to'. When the things in question have wills or intentions of their own, then the power to which they are subjected is necessarily political, 'power over', and may generate resistance, rebellion or even compliance. The experience of power in such circumstances will produce a consciousness of power which becomes a secondary factor in the relations between parties which has an independent role in power exchanges between them.

It will be shown that the consciousness of power entails cultural constructions of the relationship between reason and emotion which derive from socially significant institutional frameworks. In particular, the historical trajectory of West European institutions and the power relations implicit in them tend to culturally separate reason and emotion whereas a contrasting consciousness, of their unity, emerged through Chinese institutional development. These different constructions of the relationship between reason and emotion raise questions of whether different conceptions of power might be similarly located. The paper goes on to consider some typical conceptualisations of power in the mainstream literature and a representative Chinese account of power.

### **Reason and Emotion in Power Relations.**

Those who exercise power over others typically have a consciousness of it that is qualitatively different than the consciousness of those subordinated by it. In both cases the consciousness in question is never merely cognitive but also emotional. This is because participation in relations of any sort requires and generates a sense of involvement which may be positive or negative, strong or weak, but always includes an evaluation of the other, the self and the relations between them. These evaluations register in the person's physical structure and their dispositions for subsequent action; they therefore constitute the indicators of emotion, including physiological processes, feeling states and motivation. Before returning to these issues below another consequence of power for considerations of emotion which is an important aspect of both the consciousness of power and also emotions will be treated, namely the dichotomy of reason and emotion that arguably derives from relations of power.

The association of the exercise of power with reason or rationality on the one hand and the subordination to power with emotion on the other hand is so historically pervasive as to constitute a cultural constant. Those who exercise power typically experience their control of events and the people caught up in them as rational. Those who oppose the power they are subjected to are often seen as irrational and emotional. Each side of this equation will be dealt with separately. Cultural constants are aspects of popular consciousness that may be reflected in academic writing.

A condition of both power and rationality, according to Max Weber, who wrote extensively and authoritatively on both topics, is the actor's deliberation, consciousness and intentionality. Weber says that for an action to be rational it must follow the actor's own deliberative considerations, that the rational actor is free of external constraints (Weber 1975: 186). This theme, of linking rationality with the power to control, is continuous throughout Weber's work. In *Economy and Society* he says that action which is voluntary and free-willed is rational because it is action which is not controlled but which itself controls (Weber 1978: 23-24). Power, Weber (1978: 53, 926) famously writes, is the probability that an actor can 'realize [their] will' or be in a 'position to carry out [their] own will' in spite of resistance. What is important in all of this for our purposes is that an actor's power and rationality, which Weber sees as continuous factors, is for him the obverse of emotion.

Emotion is inherently irrational for Weber, and those subjected to it are without controlling engagements of their own (see Barbalet 2001: 36-37, 53). Political 'obedience', Weber (1970: 79) says, 'is determined by highly robust motives of fear and hope'. Political states may encourage the loyalty of those subject to them, according to Weber (1978: 269) by 'winning glory and honour in war or by promoting their material welfare'; in neither case is reason the effective factor. Weber's discussion of modern or national citizenship and political parties indicates further the notion that those subordinate to political power are mobilised by it not through reason but emotional manipulation (Weber, 1994a: 113, 124-125; Weber, 1994b: 230; see Barbalet 2010).

Those who are subordinated to power risk being given the appellation of irrationality and emotionality. The apparent contradiction between rationality on the one hand, and the inner life of emotional feeling on the other, is frequently localised as an aspect of the sexual division of labour, consisting of male power and female subordination or weakness. This rationality/emotionality dichotomisation maps onto other relationships of power and subordination in which colonised, junior and otherwise disabled or under resourced elements are characterized as emotional and irrational in contradistinction to persons or groups who possess resources or are otherwise able to exercise power and are seen as rational.

Indeed, the distinction between rationality and emotionality as symptomatic of the direction of power and subjection has representation in historic transformations of individuation and consciousness. In the classic phase of individuation, in Europe from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, thematized in the doctrine of 'individualism', selfhood is construed in terms of persons being the proprietors of their own capacities and able managers of their own interests. Under these conditions persons are not only regarded as independent centres of consciousness but necessarily rational. These are the elemental units of liberal political economy. Here the political and economic capacities of which persons have command permits an experience of control or its possibility.

A challenge to this form of individualism emerged almost parallel to it and gained pace during the nineteenth century. The commanding power of industrialized economic forces was seen as subverting merely human capabilities, reason was challenged as an agent of alienated power and emotional consciousness and sensibility was instead now regarded as the more meaningful basis of self realisation. Romanticism as a movement draws these various strands together.

Under conditions of late modernity experiences of self as independent of others is intensified although without a sense that the individual is a centre of consciousness but rather a locus of emotional feeling. This arises in the experiential shift from a sense of control or meaningful participation in external market and politico-administrative processes to a sense of having no such ability to influence these things. Under such circumstances selfhood is likely to be constituted as an emotional rather than as a rational-conscious centre of being, when a person's controlling faculties are directed not to the external environment in which they operate but to inner processes and especially those of emotional expressivity. These late modern developments are background to the conventional salience of emotions that is located in the advent of sociological and philosophical interest in emotions from the late 1970s, and which accounts for their focus on 'emotions management' (Barbalet 2001: 171-176).

The culturally pervasive dichotomy of reason and emotion does not withstand scrutiny. Reason, for example, requires emotion, although not necessarily those labile, visceral and self-projecting emotions privileged in the conventional construction of the category 'emotion' (Barbalet 2011a). The radical distinction between reason and emotion that since Plato at least has been an enduring feature of what might loosely be called Western thought has been challenged by a substantial literature in neurology (Damasio 1994), philosophy (de Sousa 1987; Nussbaum 2003) and sociology (Barbalet 2001). A striking feature of this recent literature, as one commentator has noted, 'is the almost total absence of reference to Asian thought' (Marks 1991: 1).

### **Reason and Emotion Combined in *Xin*.**

In contrast to the radical separation and antithesis of reason and emotion in mainstream Western thought there is in the Chinese intellectual tradition an implicit assumption of the unity of thought and emotion, expressed through a single concept, *xin*, which literally translates as 'heart-mind'. According to Benjamin Schwartz (1985: 184) the concept of *xin* 'plays a crucial role in the discourse of the [formative period of Chinese philosophy] ... and the subsequent development of Chinese thought'. He goes on to say that the concept of *xin* must be understood as 'the centre of will, emotion, desire, and intellect (both rational and intuitive)' (Schwartz 1985: 184).

For over 3,000 years, then, Chinese intellectual traditions have treated reason and emotion as co-existing within a single faculty through the notion of *xin*. In all of its applications in classical Chinese literatures *xin* embraces both rational or intellectual and emotional aspects in combination, and in Chinese understanding reason and emotion are not separate and independent in the familiar Western sense. In all major Chinese thinkers there is a shared recognition of the unity of both intellectual and emotional qualities which are internal to *xin*. It is not possible here to provide a detailed exposition of the treatment of *xin* in Chinese thought (see Qi 2011: 252-91). More relevant for the present discussion is to show how different historical configurations of societal power relations are responsible for these contrasting currents of the relationship between rationality and emotion.

Sociological explanations of the separation of emotion and reason in Western development focus on the predominance of instrumental rationality principally sponsored by market relations and institutions. Agnes Heller (1979: 185) describes a dual structure of capitalism in which there is a distinction between the 'domain of the market [as] the world of instrumental rationality', on the one hand and the 'domain of the family [as] the world of emotional "inwardness"' on the other. Georg Simmel (1971: 328-9) similarly indicates that urban and market relationships both depend on and generate a calculative or instrumental orientation which displace emotion as a 'reason' for acting and as a motivational force in the relations between people. Under those circumstances these relations become impersonal and thus 'instead of reacting emotionally, the metropolitan type reacts primarily in a rational

manner' (Simmel 1971: 326). In this way the instrumentalism derived from capitalistic markets and the power relations in them produces the culturally pervasive separation of emotion from reason. It might be added parenthetically that Simmel is not arguing that emotion ceases to operate under conditions of market rationality: the mechanism which truncates emotional efficacy is an emotion that is an antidote to emotional expression, what Simmel calls the 'blasé feeling' (Simmel 1971: 326).

It is of interest that in an early modern text written at a time when market society was becoming important in Scotland but still influenced by the clan structure of the Highlands, Adam Ferguson (1966) characterises the relations between emotions and reason as non-oppositional and in a way reminiscent of the Chinese concept of *xin*. Ferguson (1966: 29) says:

... there is a felicity of conduct in human affairs, in which it is difficult to distinguish the promptitude of the head from the ardour and sensibility of the heart. Where both are united, they constitute that superiority of mind, the frequency of which among men, in particular ages and nations, much more than the progress they have made in speculation, or in the practice of mechanical and liberal arts, should determine the rate of their genius, and assign the palm of distinction and honour.

The implicit comparative perspective in Ferguson, of the encroaching market with its privileging of a rationality separated from emotion, on the one hand, and the martial and heroic society of the Highland clans in which passion and action were united, on the other, suggests distinct types of societal systems which contribute to the different forms of relationship between emotion and reason treated in this article.

The advantage of comparison, but with a much longer historical reach than Ferguson's, is employed in a discussion of patriarchy in Western Europe and China that supports the type of explanation presented here regarding the variable relationship between emotion and reason. Gary Hamilton (1990) shows that the constitution and developmental potential of patriarchy in European and in Chinese societies were fundamentally different. Western patriarchy, he says, is tied to 'the symbolic structure of authority underlying Western religions, particularly Christianity and Judaism' (Hamilton 1990: 93). A legacy of Western patriarchy, then, is a conceptualization of power 'viewed as a positive force, emanating from the will of the superior – from the father, the priest, or the ruler' (Hamilton 1990: 93). Hamilton does not develop the point but a corollary of his argument is that a corresponding conception of power in political and legal practices is related to a notion of rationality which has an imperative over and against emotional feelings.

Chinese patriarchy, instead of emphasising the instrumental power of a superior, Hamilton (1990: 93) says, 'places the stress on the subordinate's duty to obey (*hsiao*), assigns role obligations that signify his or her submission to duty (e.g. mourning rites), and restricts legitimate acts of power and obedience to behaviour in role sets (e.g., father/son, emperor/subjects, husband/wife)'. We should recognise these relations as those set out by Confucius. Indeed, Hamilton (1990: 93) says that 'this depersonalised form of patriarchy is in turn justified by the belief that it is the duty of all individuals to conform to their roles in order to maintain the harmony of the whole'. While this discussion associates the structure of relations with a doctrine, Confucianism, it is understood that the doctrine legitimates but does not generate the form of relationships in which behaviour is prescribed by the obligations of interlocking roles. Before considering the underlying social structure Hamilton alludes to, it can be noted that the form of role-power characteristic of Chinese patriarchy does not force a separation of emotion and reason but relies on their unity.

The traditional agrarian structure of Chinese society underlies an orientation toward family and kinship. While the Chinese peasant is a 'sufficient unit to provide the necessary and minimum social co-operation in everyday economic pursuits' (Fei 1946: 2), the gentry,

on the other hand, find it necessary to organise beyond the immediate family into kinship groups in order to both secure their rule over peasants and also maintain their advantaged position – through clan organisation – in Chinese society. Kinship or clan organisation provides the gentry with a security required because they are ‘an economically unproductive class living upon privileges [which makes them] politically vulnerable’ (Fei 1946: 4). Kinship or clan organisation provides the gentry with a capacity to preserve their land and privilege through alliance formations that are based on common family name or association. Patricia Ebrey and James Watson (1986: 1) summarise such a situation: ‘Throughout the imperial period, not only were family and kinship of major importance to ordinary people, as they have been everywhere, but they were central to the practical, political, and ethical concerns of the elite’.

Kinship organisation or clan operates through the observance of its member’s moral obligations and their fulfilment of reputational requirements, associated with such things as ‘face’. In this type of society dispute resolution does not focus on enforcing ‘an abstract moral law’ but on the arbitration of ‘a compromise’ (Grief and Tabellini 2010: 137). Moral obligations and reconciliation within a kinship group or clan relationship require the involvement of both familial attachment and the emotional feelings associated with it, and also the cognitive considerations of responsibility and the judgements of moral duty and code. Here emotion feelings and reasoned deliberation are seen as inseparable, working together in delivering a unified outcome. In doing so there is no organisational or cultural force distinguishing them as separate or opposed faculties.

The corresponding European experience was quite different. The Church discouraged tribal or clan tendencies and operated with a marriage dogma that undermined large kinship organisations by proscribing such practices as adoption, polygamy, concubinage, marriages among distant kin, and marriages without the woman’s consent (Grief 2006: 308-312). By the ninth century the nuclear family predominated. Legal codes no longer linked rights and kinship (Grief and Tabellini 2010: 137). Generalised morality and the absence of kin groups by the tenth century led to a distinct trajectory of societal organisation (Grief 2005; 2006). These culminated in the formation of independent cities and the market economy, with the consequences for instrumental rationality and the cultural representation of the opposition of emotions and reason noted above. Such developments did not occur in China. One consequence of this, as Grief and Tabellini (2010: 139) note, is that ‘kinship groups remain a more important conduit for economic exchange in China’. Family enterprises are prevalent in China, and market relationships involve both instrumentality and attachment. *Guanxi*, which is significant in business relations (Gold, Guthrie and Wank 2002; Hermann-Pillath 2009), entails involvement of both emotion and reason. In these ways there is continuity from imperial to present-day China (Peng 2005) and the continuing provision of a social basis for non-opposition of emotion and reason in institutions and also in cultural representation.

The contrasting positions described here, concerning the relationship of emotion and reason in European and Chinese mainstream thought, derive from differences in social and constitutional structure and in the social relations of power and their institutional bases in the respective developments of these societies. The emphasis on power as an attribute of individuals, the enforcement of formal law and the development of the capitalist market in Western Europe encourage the distinction between and opposition of emotion and reason. The formation of social power in the obligations of roles in relationships, the constitution of moral obligations within family and the dominance of kinship group and clan relationships in China, on the other hand, lead to the integration of emotion and reason and the absence of a sense of one being privileged over the other.

## **A Chinese Conception of Power.**

Having explained the different cultural conceptualizations of the relationship between rationality and emotion in terms of the historical development of societal structures of power it can now be asked whether there is a distinctive conceptualisation of power itself in Chinese traditions.

The academic literature concerning power tends to operate in terms of distinctions within the concept of power itself. An historically important understanding of power as an actor's 'present means, to obtain some future apparent good', provided by the seventeenth century founder of modern political philosophy Thomas Hobbes (1962: 43), has generated a continuing debate concerning whether capacities and resources ('present means') or outcomes ('some future apparent good') are the *sine qua non* of power. In a much more recent development Stephen Lukes' widely used presentation of three dimensions of power (Lukes 1974) distinguishes between a first dimension of power expressed through explicit decisions that tends to be coercive and generative of conflict, a second dimension expressed through a manipulation of the environment in which the decisions of others are constrained, and a third dimension expressed through the dissemination of ideologies or values which affect the motivations or interests of others.

It is also necessary to mention a distinction between hard and soft power that much has recently been made of in international relations theory (Gallarotti 2011). The concept of soft power emphasizes the importance of cooption and persuasion rather than the coercive exercise of military might in the relations between states (Nye 2004). A preference of dominant states for the exercise of soft power rather than hard would make a difference to the climate of world politics; but the analytic distinction on which it is conceptualized is not novel nor does the notion of soft power contribute to a theory of power that departs from the mainstream. The means of power have consistently been described in social theory in terms of three types: coercion or physical means, utilitarian means including positive or negative incentives and benefits, and normative means including persuasion, opinion and values (Russell 1938; Neumann 1950; Etzioni 1964). The notion of soft power emphasises the last of these to the relative exclusion of the other two.

The tripartite distinction of power-means readily maps onto Lukes' three-dimensions of power, in which the first or behavioural dimension can be seen as coercive, the second or quasi-behavioural dimension in which the parameters of behaviour are manipulated is parallel to incentive provision, and the third or non-behavioural dimension in which wants are generated corresponds with values and norms as means of power. Irrespective of whatever means is applied power is understood in all of these and similar approaches as a polar relationship in which the realisation of an actor's capacities achieves an objective against another which they will. Additionally, power in this sense is almost always a zero-sum relationship insofar as the power exercised by A over B corresponds to B's loss of power to A.

The conception of power in Chinese intellectual traditions is by no means unitary (Jullien 1995). At one extreme is a conception of power reminiscent of the one outlined above, namely the Legalist notion of power that emerged with the founding of the Chinese empire in the second century BC, focused on political rule. According to the systematizer of Legalist thought, Han Feizi, a ruler's power (*shi*) operates in terms of the polar elements of human nature, namely aversion to punishment and satisfaction in benevolence, which constitute 'the two handles' of an emperor's rule (Ames 1983: 88-94). While the Legalist tradition is important in the history of Chinese political thought it has had no continuing developmental significance. A quite different and philosophically richer understanding of power is in *Daodejing*, a text written approximately 3,000 years ago and perennially drawn upon in Chinese political philosophy (Gao and Gong 1995; Lai 2000, 2008; Moeller 2006).

The point of view articulated in *Daodejing* operates in terms of paradox and the notion of a paradox of power is indicated on a number of levels in the text. First, the statement of the concept of power draws attention to a paradox of strategy in power relations. Secondly, the theory of power in *Daodejing* paradoxically does not depend on the concept of power indicated in it but on factors which effectively render this concept of power misleading. In what follows the concept of power as a paradox of strategy will be outlined. Next, an exposition of the broader theory of power in *Daodejing* which informs Chinese political thought will be provided.

The concept of power in *Daodejing* is relatively well known and can be simply stated. It operates in terms of a paradoxical strategy described in Chapter 36 as ‘subtle discernment’, namely that the ‘submissive and weak will overcome the hard and the strong’ (Laozi 1963: 41). This conception of power is expressed in terms of two sets of metaphors, of water and the feminine. While water is formless and compliant it can wear down mountains, as in chapter 78: ‘In the world there is nothing more submissive and weak than water. Yet for attacking that which is hard and strong nothing can surpass it’ (Laozi 1963: 85; see also 41, 50). This general principle is expressed in the form of a sexual metaphor in chapter 61, where it is asserted that the strategic advantage of states can be preserved if in their relation with other states they do not contend but take the ‘lower position’: ‘In the union of the world, the female always gets the better of the male by stillness. Being still, she takes the lower position’ (Laozi 1963: 68; see also 73). The paradox of power, then, is that the weaker party is effectively and paradoxically more powerful than the stronger.

The concept of power represented here, as one which indicates the strategic advantages of avoiding confrontation, as in *Daodejing* chapters 69 and 73 (Laozi 1963: 76, 80), of persuasion rather than force, of leading by following as in chapter 66 (Laozi 1963: 73), tends to suggest that it can be seen as an early formulation of the notion of soft power. We shall see that this is not an adequate understanding of the concept. Another possibility is that this conception of power, rather than a characterisation of means of power, summarised as ‘soft power’, refers to a category of empirical situations or outcomes of power relations.

Without referring to this Chinese tradition Jack Hirshleifer discusses a situation he describes as the ‘paradox of power’: ‘In conflictual interactions ... we might ordinarily expect the strong to grow even stronger and the weak weaker. Nevertheless, surprisingly often, initially weaker or poorer contenders end up gaining on initially stronger or wealthier opponents. This is the paradox of power’ (Hirshleifer 2001: 44). Here the paradox of power is explained in terms of differences between contenders in the ‘the marginal payoff of conflictual effort’ (Hirshleifer 2001: 66), which is to say that under certain circumstances weaker contenders may fight harder because more highly motivated than the stronger. Hirshleifer’s paradox of power, then, is behavioural. In *Daodejing* it is methodological. Before explicating this difference the circumstantial emotions can be indicated.

The underlying emotional force of Hirshleifer’s paradox of power is the weaker party’s resolute confidence and optimism. One close reader of *Daodejing*, A.C. Graham, sees its sustaining emotional commitment as a quite different one, namely abject fear. Graham’s summary of *Daodejing* in general refers also to its conception of power in particular:

[*Daodejing*’s] interweaving of metaphors, water, valley, root, gate, mother, the Way itself as only another of them, is not the illustration of abstract thoughts, it is the thinking itself. *Lao-tzu* is the masterpiece of a kind of intelligence at the opposite pole from the logical. It concentrates instead of explicating, starkly juxtaposes instead of filling in gaps ... At the root of the thinking, pervading this book of evasions and retreats disguised as a pseudonym, is one dominant emotion, fear ... The pressing concern is with how the small state and the small man survive in a world of murderously competing powers (Graham 1999: 218).

Fear, of course, is typically characterised in terms of flight or withdrawal. But it is not clear that the degree to which that withdrawal which is implicit in the paradox of power in *Daodejing* is based on fear.

Juxtaposition is a currency in *Daodejing*, as Graham indicates in the above quotation. Juxtaposition and paradox here are not symptomatic of fear, however, but are elements of a philosophical methodology that relates to the issue of change and what can be made of it. The underlying emotion associated with this latter position is not fear or similar negative prospective emotions but rather those positive prospective emotions that arise out of a sense of preparedness concerning and acceptance of change that characterises much of Chinese philosophy, expressed in a foundational text *Yijing* (*Book of Changes*) (Lynn 1994: 51, 56, 64-5, 77). In order to develop this line of reasoning it is important to consider the method of paradox in *Daodejing*.

There are many distinct readings of *Daodejing*: it has been read as a self-cultivation manual, religious tract, proto-scientific exposition, and handbook of political advice. Irrespective of these different concerns a crucial dimension of *Daodejing* is its method of paradox, which saturates the text. *Daodejing* begins with the paradox of language: 'The *dao* that can be described in language is not the constant *dao*; the name that can be given is not its constant name' (Laozi 1999: 51). Language is an inadequate instrument for describing reality, the names it provides to things are insufficient to capture those things; also, language 'freezes' objects which change, and language itself fails to note or track such changes. Language is used to account for a thing and delineate its features, but it tends instead to hold constant in thought what has already changed in reality.

There is more. Contrasting couples can be located throughout the text: *Dao* and *de* or generality and specificity, sagacity and ignorance (Laozi 1963: 23), self-effacement and illustriousness (Laozi 1963: 27), female and male (Laozi 1963: 33), the submissive and the powerful (Laozi 1963: 50), and so on. This is widely taken to imply that in its evaluation of the items presented in such dyads the lower or weaker side is supported against the higher or stronger side (Lau 1963: xix; Schwartz 1985: 203). This interpretation indicates a good deal about the social perspective and political stand of *Daodejing*. Chad Hansen adds a methodological dimension, however, when he notes:

The emphasis on *wu*, submissiveness, the *Yin*, female, dark, water-like values is not there because these distinctions are constant. It is there only as a heuristic corrective to our conventional presuppositions of what has positive value (Hansen 1992: 225).

Hansen here suggests two important qualifications to the more conventional reading of the treatment of contrasting qualities in *Daodejing*. First, the conceptual dyads should not be seen as referring to enduring relationships. Indeed, it is frequently mentioned in *Daodejing* that there is no constancy in things themselves or in the relations between them. The easy becomes difficult, the weak become strong; each condition is necessarily temporary and yields to a different and frequently contrasting condition (Laozi 1963: 6, 70, 71, 83). The second thing Hansen mentions, implied in the first but less frequently noted in the literature, is that the conventional or prevailing perception of worldly qualities can benefit from an agnostic perspective, which *Daodejing* provides.

*Daodejing*, then, points not to the moral virtue or social and political value of subordination over domination, as a political reading of the text supposes, but to the paradox that the limitations of insufficiency, for instance, may not be greater than the problems of abundance. But even this reading of *Daodejing* is incomplete. The method of the text is not simply to locate and identify paradox. It is to provide a comprehensive account of the unending process of paradox in paradoxical integration. The term 'integration' here indicates not a resolution of or solution to any given paradox, but the non-contradictory or non-destructive correspondence of opposites in a single thing or event at a given moment in time.



Paradoxes are never finally resolved, according to *Daodejing*, but continually reproduced in the unending flux and process of the world. The concept of paradoxical integration, then, is arguably the most significant feature of *Daodejing*, even though seldom systematically treated or appreciated. It is a concept that not only underlies the theory of power in *Daodejing* but also functions as a wide-spread and historically important psychological factor in China through which hardships are seen as if not temporary at least non-enduring (Lusthaus 1990: 207).

### **Wuwei: Action, Power and Change.**

Having considered the paradox of power as a strategy, in which weakness overcomes strength, and as a methodology, which assumes that there is no permanence in the world including in the capacities or circumstances of actors, it is now possible to more fully indicate the theory of power in *Daodejing*. It has been shown that the concept of power as a paradox of strategy emphasises the actor's propensity to withdraw, disengage or otherwise indicate incapacity through non-assertiveness or self-effacement. A concept coterminous with this notion in *Daodejing* is *wuwei*, variously translated as non-action, effortless or non-coercive action (Barbalet 2011b: 339). We shall see that the concept of *wuwei* as an understanding of action fills out the theory of power in *Daodejing*.

Action is ordinarily understood as terms of the actor's intentions to achieve a future outcome they desire. Power is then a particular type of action. But action in this sense is the practical obverse of *wuwei*. In the second chapter of *Daodejing* it is stated that: 'The sages develop things but do not initiate them, they act on behalf of things but do not lay any claim to them, they see things through to fruition but do not take credit for them' (Laozi 2003: 80). As well as constituting action that does not direct the relations it facilitates, *wuwei*, according to chapter 63, is action that is timely and therefore understands the sequences of the events it nurtures: 'Take account of the difficult while it is still easy, and deal with the large while it is still tiny. The most difficult things in the world originate with the easy, and the largest issues originate with the tiny' (Laozi 2003: 175). The idea represented here, that any moment or event is part of a larger unfolding process, which is inherent in classical Chinese thought as noted above, relies on the notion that energy flows, *qi*, animates movement between temporal phases.

This general theme is continued in chapter 64, although the perspective shifts from an understanding of the process to the correlative restraint on the actor: 'Those who would do things ruin them; those who would control things lose them ... because the sages do things non-coercively they do not ruin them, and because they do not try to control things they do not lose them' (Laozi 2003: 178). In each of these statements and others *wuwei* is action that is appropriate to the inherent dynamic of what is acted on, subordinating the actor's extraneous and self-centred purposes in order to realise the full potential of events as they unfold under appropriate stewardship or careful management.

The idea of *wuwei* as being commensurate with the nature of the thing towards which the action is directed, implicit above, means that if the nature of something is understood, then action towards it can be appropriate and timely – neither premature nor too late, as in chapter 64: 'Deal with a situation before it happens; bring it under control before it gets out of hand' (Laozi 2003: 177). This acknowledgment of a dynamic dimension and unfolding of events, which means that things become other than they were and will become other than they are, is a source of paradox that *Daodejing* addresses and exemplifies throughout, as we have seen. Another form of paradox, the paradox of strategy, has also been identified and discussed above.

There is a further element of *wuwei* as a form of action that is important here, which is *wuwei* as example to others. This idea, represented in chapters 2 and 43, can be more fully quoted to indicate its presupposition in paradoxical relations:

Determinacy and indeterminacy give rise to each other,

Difficult and easy complement each other...

It is for this reason that sages keep to service that does not entail coercion

And disseminate teachings that go beyond what can be said.

[...]

Rare are those in the world who reach an understanding of the benefits of teaching that go beyond what can be said, and of doing things non-coercively (Laozi 2003: 80, 145).

The idea of teachings ‘that go beyond what can be said’ suggests that another person’s action can be achieved by example. Not only does this indicate a particular form of power, it expresses the idea of rulership frequently indicated in *Daodejing* and characteristic of much Chinese political thought which holds that government or organisation provides a context for spontaneity in others, as in chapter 57: ‘We do things non-coercively (*wuwei*) and the common people develop along their own lines’ (Laozi 2003: 166). The educative role of *wuwei*, action that is effective in the example it provides to another, can be seen to have efficacy in at least two senses. Action as example is conduct of one that animates another; also, action as example means that the different positions or roles in any given situation participate together in the realisation of an outcome. Both of these understandings of action presuppose interconnectedness in the world and in agency, through which *wuwei* is realized.

This account of action and power bears a superficial resemblance to the idea, associated with the work of Anthony Giddens (1979), of ‘interactional power’ and power as a ‘transformative capacity’ of action. According to this approach all agents in power relations exercise transformative capacities: ‘Power, in this relational sense, concerns the capability of actors to secure outcomes where the realisation of these outcomes depends upon the agency of others’ (Giddens 1979: 93). The difference between agents with power over others and agents subject to the power of others is centred on who complies with whose wants. But this depends on the difference in resources mobilised by agents, confusingly expressed by Giddens as the difference in transformative capacities between agents: ‘structures of domination involve asymmetries of resources employed in the sustaining of power relations in and between systems of interaction’ (Giddens 1979: 93). It will be clear that Giddens’ departure from what might be called ‘positional’ approaches to power, which operates in terms of means or resources for power, is not fundamental. It will also be apparent that the interactions referred to in Giddens’ interaction approach are those between discrete actors with little attention paid to the interaction agents have not only with each other but with the context or framework in which inter-agentic relations occur, emphasized in the Chinese approach treated here.

From this account a number of elements of action that are identified in *Daodejing*, and which have wider currency in Chinese thought, can be contrasted with the conception of action in mainstream social theories. Three themes in particular emerge in the conception of action set out here. First, the thing or event acted upon is never regarded as inert, passive or without its own agentic capacity; second, no actor is independent of other actors and non-actors, but is interconnected with them in various ways; third, things are subordinate to the processes through which they have manifestation, and these processes are dynamic and things in them are ever becoming different. These background ideas inform the notion of *wuwei* as non-interfering action which accommodates to social processes, as non-wilful action directed to realising the potential of events and others, and as action that animates others to act on their own behalf. In all of these *wuwei* is not self-assertive but self-effacing or ‘weak’. Thus

the concept of *wuwei* implies an approach to action and power that is not only quite different from standard mainstream treatments but that arguably offers a broader grasp of the issues raised by action and power.

*Wuwei*, as effortless or non-coercive action, intervenes in events in a manner that does not confront or operate in tension with them but rather accommodates to them. This requires that *wuwei* as action cannot be described principally in terms of the actor's intentions or capacities but in terms of the thing acted upon and the processes to which it is subjected: synchronicity through action as *wuwei* replaces the notion of causality in power. This requires that those who practice *wuwei* are aware of the relationships that constitute the objects of their concern more than they are of their own interests. The conception of action that underlies the theory of power in *Daodejing* can therefore be seen as departing from standard approaches on a number of crucial points.

### **Conclusion.**

The emotional underscore of action and power in *Daodejing* is not fear, as Graham suggests, but confidence born of an understanding of the processes of change to which persons and things are subjected and also the feeling of satisfaction in realising the potential in events and others. The separation of emotion and reason that is familiar in standard approaches and challenged in recent thought does not arise in *Daodejing*, or in classical Chinese thought at all, as shown above. While the strategy of the paradox of power in *Daodejing* bears a superficial resemblance to the concept of soft power, it has been shown in the present paper that the theory of power in *Daodejing* is not properly speaking a precursor to the notion of soft power, which addresses the means of power, but operates in terms of a methodology of paradox which emphasizes change and the ever likely transformation of the agent's capacities through developments in their environment, as indicated in the discussion above.

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